
Victims of abuse. Msgr. Ghizzoni: “We ask for forgiveness, we are here to listen and support you”

"To pray for the victims of abuse, for all those who have been wounded so severely in their flesh and in their hearts. We are committed to taking responsibility for this pain, asking for forgiveness. At the same time, we hope that this initiative will heighten the awareness and responsibility of all the people of God with regard to the children, young people and adolescents entrusted to our care in all our environments, from parishes to oratories and schools." Msgr. **Lorenzo Ghizzoni**, archbishop of Ravenna-Cervia, President of the National Service for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults at the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) presented the First National Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse on Thursday November 18, with a wide range of initiatives promoted at local level by dioceses across the country. For example, the city of Bolzano will host a conference entitled "Let's talk about it! Opportunities and challenges for dealing with the abuse of power and violence", including the participation of abuse survivors. A prayer vigil will be celebrated in Piacenza's cathedral with Bishop Adriano Cevolotto, while the Day will be marked on Sunday 21 November in Cuneo, described as an initiative that "reflects the determination of the Italian Church to reaffirm and proceed in the direction of transparency and 'parrhesia' as taught in the Gospel, and confirmed by the commitments undertaken in the past few years." In Bologna, with Card. Zuppi, the diocesan service will present itself to the city with a conference and prayer in the local communities on Sunday.

Monsignor Ghizzoni, several Churches in Europe, from France to Germany, have recently been deeply upset by shocking investigations into abuses committed by clergy members.

Why does this scourge struggle to emerge so strongly in Italy? As a matter of fact, this scourge did and still does exist in Italy. In the countries mentioned, reports, denunciations and accounts from the past have surfaced in large numbers also because of a particular chain reaction mechanism. There have been several criminal cases in Italy too, but not the ripple effect that we have seen in other countries. **Police operations coordinated by Turin's Public Prosecutor's Office succeeded in dismantling a child pornography network only a few days ago, including the arrest of a priest. Investigators reported finding 'gruesome' photographs. What do you feel when you read this news?** *It's terrible. I believe that such incidents arouse repulsion, even rage, in everyone. But at the same time they stir the resolve and the desire to put an end to this vile activity.* In Italy, for example, Don Fortunato di Noto has been working to combat child pornography. His reports show a dramatic and particularly serious increase in the exploitation of minors and even young children, including babies and toddlers over the last period, in connection with the pandemic, for the purpose of creating videos and other child pornography material. However, it must be said that while there is a production of child pornography, there is also a considerable number of consumers who feed the market. Public opinion must be made aware that behind every image there is exploitation and violence. These are very serious crimes, wounds inflicted forever. **Let us return to the abuses committed in the Church. It is commonly believed that the Italian Church does too little in this area. How do you respond to this criticism?** *There has been a spate of cases and reports in many countries, not all. As I said before, this did not happen in our country. But it does not mean that the Italian Church is dismissing, neglecting or silencing the victims or the reports.* On the contrary, I have to say that based on the information gathered over the last few years, many dioceses have taken action, and when such incidents have been reported or denounced the response has been one of responsibility and intervention in accordance with the rules and guidelines that we have set for ourselves. I can safely say that this is being done in Italy today. **Which practical measures have been taken?** We created and implemented a network of contact persons in charge of the diocesan Services for the Protection of Minors, actively operating across all Italian dioceses. Half of these are members of the clergy and the other half are lay people - mostly women. They are all experts and qualified professionals in this field. We have also set Guidelines for ourselves, approved

by the Italian bishops, which provide firm recommendations. One of these instructions, for example, is the moral commitment of the bishops to denounce all persons, including clergy and men and women religious, who committed this crime and to cooperate with the judiciary in all cases and at all times. *This is a moral commitment that extends beyond Italian legislation.* **Are you saying that having contact persons in every diocese means that victims of abuse or their families can knock on the bishop's door everywhere?** Yes, and not just knock but be heard. A [list of all the dioceses](#) with telephone numbers and e-mail addresses can be found on the website of the National Service for the Protection of Minors. *We believe that new cases and past cases will emerge also through this kind of initiative. The contact person and the counselling centre are a guarantee that the diocesan Church is there to lend a listening ear and offer support.* **In the light of the National Day of Prayer, which words would you like to address to the victims, to the abusers still in hiding?** To the victims we beg forgiveness and offer our full human closeness, and especially our willingness to embrace their experience, listen to their story and support them according to their needs. To the abusers, however, I say: *Whatever has happened in your life, step forward, ask for help, talk to experts and seek psychological and spiritual support. You will never succeed on your own.* **What is your message to the Catholic communities in Italy?** The Pope is asking us to respond together. Everyone must do their part to ensure that our environments and activities are safe and secure. If the opposite were to happen, that is, if we were to disregard the problem or leave it to a select group of experts, we would risk committing not only a sin of omission, but we would also fail in our efforts to be communities based on a culture of respect for the human person, especially the child and the vulnerable among us.

M. Chiara Biagioni